



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE FAMILY ALTAR

REV. H. G. W. SMITH
Ridgefield Park, New Jersey

Practical piety begins at home—sometimes. In our modern world it often begins away from home. Many parents find it easier to teach a Sunday-school class composed of their neighbors' children than to talk religion seriously to their own. But how can a world become Christian if the family is untouched by religion?

Our institutions may change endlessly; but God himself remains—a great Someone to be known and followed.

Forty years ago there lived in a country district not far from Boston a healthy ten-year-old boy. He was one of five. His father was of the stock that gives color to the idea that the country in which stories of Plymouth Rock still hovered about the family albums was a country filled with strict virtue. On those long winter evenings, after the meal and the frolic and perhaps the meager study of some, but before any but the tiniest had gone to bed, the napping one in front of the fire, the mother at the knitting, and even the visitor were all called together for a few minutes while the good father read from the monstrous family Bible and led them in a sincere prayer. It was the family altar; and the children and parents alike were learning to acknowledge God, who has been our dwelling-place in all generations.

Today that boy is fifty. He lives in a small New Jersey town under the shadow of a mighty city. He owns a cozy little home, has two bright and attractive children, a most exceptional wife, and all that need be present to make a sensible man thankful and responsible.

In this little hamlet under the wing of the great city there are two institutions quite incomplete without him: the first is the tumble-down railroad station, in which he is everything from janitor to general manager; and the second is a little Baptist church that harbors all denominations with scarcely a creedal ripple. There you have him. He is a droll philosopher who talks little but always well; a Christian whose example is as true as the blue of his eye; a patriarch who works where he is needed and cares little for praise; but do you know that you could not *hire* that man to read the Bible or lead in prayer either in his home or in a religious meeting? He would rather join the army or take a whipping.

The family Bible and the moment of open family devotion have passed from the home of Mr. W. He retains his fine character. His family life is beautiful. In this particular he is exceptional; but in another particular his case is typical of thousands. The old family altar is crumbling; and it is quite uncertain that his children will in years to come have a sufficiently full confidence in God to make them capable of reproducing the home of their childhood. Distance has given authority to

the supposition that our former virtue was almost utopian; history is so stubbornly unorthodox as to say that even in Puritan days there were wife-beaters, backbiters, town sots, married flirts, and thieves, just as there are now. Still the children and grandchildren of the Puritan stock show us that somewhere in their lives there was a fairly high average of true and undefiled religion. And there can be little fair doubt that the old family altar played a large part in this high average. It kept the family conscious of God, our dwelling-place.

I

Society is much changed and is still changing. The disappearance of the family altar is so general as not to be dismissed with a veneration bow. It must be viewed with thoroughness and dealt with according to an accurate science and above all a true loyalty. If an institution capable of wide moral influence is fading from view, it may be reason for regret; but in all events it is reason for an awakening to the task of finding something to take its place.

We start with the assumption that the puritanic family altar is really becoming comparatively uncommon. An appeal to introspection and to even the most casual observation is sufficient to warrant this much. The condition is in part due to a number of industrial and educational changes.

1. In forty years the population of the country has doubled. Many who have come in this increase have settled around a few great population centers. Modern machinery and modern credit have encouraged the growth of large cities. In the East, especially, we are

rapidly becoming more industrial and less agricultural as regards family life. These matters are a mere commonplace which we almost tire of hearing. Now with this increase in the city and industrial community as against the agricultural community the interests outside of the home have had a proportionate growth. *Then* the youth had employment at home, and the home kept him for a large part of his first twenty years. *Now* in many cases he is a part of a big concern before high-school days are over. As soon as he goes to business his dependence on the home and indeed his serious consideration of the will of the home are practically at an end.

2. The long hours of the commuter and the traveling man estrange the father from the child and the child from the father. The shortness of time spent in the home, the constant pressure of business, and the accompanying tiredness of us all, all play a part in removing the older type of family altar.

3. Another factor is one which many refuse to call important. It is the factor of the average information of people. A crude sort of scientific education exists throughout society—crude, not in the sense of bad, but in the sense of unrefined. Much of it comes from the newspapers, which find themselves compelled to sacrifice accuracy to clearness and attractiveness. Much of it comes from a poorly graduated diet selected from the classroom and the public library. These are all very good. The papers, the schools, and the libraries are lifting us higher; none the less they have done their part toward creating this cool “sophisticated” attitude toward the general matters of religion. In passing

along through the catalogue of others we should not forget that many of the interpreters of religion have themselves by a self-sufficient intellectual attitude increased prejudice and coolness toward the very thing which they wanted to establish.

II

These factors all have had their influence in bringing about the present condition. How much influence they have had is mere speculation; but they have had their part. They have helped to crowd out the puritanic family type and along with it the puritanic family altar. Still the family has a great function in education and especially in *religious* education. The minister, or more probably the Sunday-school teacher may by sheer loyalty and friendship overcome the influence of a careless or bad home and lead the child to God, his dwelling-place; but it is a hard task without the co-operation of parent and brother and sister. In our work of saving society we are compelled to make a double drive. We must reach the child in order to save the future home and we must reach the parent in order to reach the child—to say nothing of the immediate good of reaching the parent. The home is the central point. And as is the religious life of your home so will be the religious life of both the church and the community. We seldom rise higher than the conversation of the dining-room and the thought of the living-room. If this be true—and by all means it is true—then—

III

We must rebuild the family altar on the foundation of the old altar, though

not necessarily on its plan. We have no law which compels us to maintain a form, however sacredly regarded, if that form no longer meets a need in our lives; but we do have an imperative law which compels us in loyalty to ourselves as religious beings to deal with ourselves according to our nature. If in your home you still maintain that fine religious practice described a few moments ago, in the same spirit with which it was then filled, it is undoubtedly having an ennobling influence in your life. But, if it has passed from you and nothing has come into its place, a vacancy is there which must be filled or you and those dependent upon your home are, as naturally religious beings, in grave danger of shriveling.

In the older type of home worship three factors were prominent: a priest, a guidebook, and a definite plan of worship. From a fair and thorough examination of ourselves it will become evident that each one of these is very helpful in a proper culture of ourselves as religious beings. Conditions have changed, but God is the same. He is the continual dwelling-place of all who would perform their highest function. Will you consider the three factors of the puritanic family altar with a view to finding something which in our own day will at least in part meet our needs.

1. The priest was the father of the family—that is, priest in the sense of interpreter. There must be someone in the home who lives with a deep consciousness of God, or at least *wants* that consciousness strongly enough to exert vital energy. Both father and mother ought to be of this character, but especially should the father feel

his responsibility. One who lives with a consciousness of God is kind, honest, and Christlike. The child naturally believes in God when he sees the parent leading in a sincere religious exercise; but he will know how much God means to the parent by the parent's conduct and by answers to a thousand normal child questions. As an interpreter of God and the universe he must answer these questions honestly according to the best of his experience. For purposes of suggestion he may tell the child stories, however unhistorical; but, when that growing soul asks a point-blank question as to fact, in the name of truth he must speak from actual experience and not from the religious gossip of one wholly unlike himself.

2. The guidebook was the Bible. We have yet found no better. The parent must teach the child to *appreciate*, not worship, it. It is the great collection of religious literary gems that have no need of any authority but that of their own beauty and eternal truth. See the beauty and truth of the Bible and present it to the child as beautiful and true. With this introduction the Book will become much more popular.

3. If we already have set aside the puritanic plan of worship but are still determined that we want to do some-

thing to serve as well, we must be assured in the first place that from ten to fifteen minutes must be found each day to be devoted to that end. It is not easy; but it is not easy to find time to eat dinner, either. Somehow we usually find time for dinner, however, and it is just as needful that we care for our religious digestive system. Two books will be of great help in giving us the material for our meditation. The first is a good version of the Bible—one that is in the undressed language of common folk and not the stilted though perhaps musical language of three centuries past—and the second is some sort of outline study to use as a guide in our reading. This outline study gives some objective to our reading so that each day is not a fragment utterly disconnected with anything before. "The Outline Bible-Study Courses" of the American Institute of Sacred Literature, published by the University of Chicago Press, are examples of the second kind of book. Outline or no outline, however, it is essential to read, meditate, and pray with the same intelligence that we summon for a newspaper editorial or a book of fiction.

On these lines we may properly urge a reconstruction of the family altar.